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The Hathor symbol, a stylized cow head with horns, is positioned to the right of the word 'HATHOR'.

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The Household Religion in ancient Egypt:

What do the archaeological evidences tell us?

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Abstract

The study of the Household Religion in Ancient Egypt is based on textual and material sources, though the greatest contribution comes from these latter. However, to the relevance of these sources is added a large number of difficulties that must be overcome in order to maximize the information available.

To illustrate these difficulties and simultaneously the contribution of the archaeological sources, this article presents to concrete examples; The Box Beds and the clay figurines. Through these cases it is possible to realize the interpretation difficulties when dealing with material sources, the relevance of comparison, but also the diversity of information they provide.

Keywords: Household Religion, Archaeological Sources, Box Bed, Clay Figurines

Resumo

O estudo da Religião Doméstica no Egito Antigo baseia-se em fontes textuais e materiais, ainda que o maior contributo venha destas últimas. Contudo, à relevância destas fontes acrescenta-se um grande número de dificuldades que é necessário ultrapassar de modo a potenciar as informações disponibilizadas.

Para ilustrar estas dificuldades e em simultâneo o contributo das fontes arqueológicas este artigo apresenta dois exemplos concretos: as Box Bed e as figuras de barro. Através destes casos é possível perceber as dificuldades de interpretação associadas às fontes materiais, a relevância da comparação de fontes mas também a diversidade de informações que elas disponibilizam.

Palavras-chave: Religião Doméstica, fontes arqueológicas, Box Bed, figuras de barro



The Household Religion – understood as the set of practices of religious nature that took place at home – is a facet of the religious phenomenon in Ancient Egypt that has clearly been relegated to the sidelines by scholars, a fact evidenced by the small number of titles devoted to the subject. Ritner even states “(...) *the term ‘household religion’ is conspicuously absent from the field of Egyptology. It is ignored or avoided in titles of volumes and articles (...)*”¹. Nevertheless, this is an issue worthy of our attention because its comprehension will contribute to a more complete picture of the religious practices in Egyptian civilization.

We include under the designation Household Religion the multiple religious practices conducted within the domestic space, such as, the worship of household gods like Bes and Taueret, e.g., ancestor cult, magical proceedings, onomastics, dreams and infant burials, among others. In general, these practices aimed to ensure family welfare, being that its focus is mainly on issues related to fertility, pregnancy, birth and childhood.

For the study of this subject we may resort to textual² and material sources, however, without underestimating the contribution of the first ones, we can affirm that the material sources are those that contribute the most to the ability to know and understand the Household religion in Ancient Egypt. And certainly this fact is one of the aspects that justify the absence of substantive work on this subject. The archaeological vestiges raise a large number of questions which must be answered to ensure a more accurate image on this religious phenomenon.

So, before we look more closely to the archaeological sources that have survived, we will identify the issues they raise.

¹ Ritner, R., “Household Religion” in Bodel, J.; Olyan, S. (eds.), *Household Religion in Antiquity*, 171.

² In this group we include everyday texts, e.g., letters that refer to religious procedures conducted at home; medical and magical spells that clarify the concerns that motivate this practices; offering formulae and dedicatory texts and also other kind of written sources that, even indirectly, can provide some data on the subject, such as the calendars of lucky and unlucky days and transactional documents.

First of all we find that, although we have available a range of sources of different types, this is a group of a very limited number of material when compared to what we have available to study de Oficial Religion³. In a second moment we realize that this material is a set of fragmentary, dispersed and even indirect nature⁴. And a closer look reveals another group of more specific difficulties: the diachrony, the spacial location and the complexity of interpretation and identification of its origin context.

Regarding the diachrony, the archaeological sources available are unevenly distributed over time with a clear preponderance for the ones dated of the New Kingdom and Late Period. This reality complicates the possibility of a deeper understanding of this religious practice in more remote periods.

In terms of spacial location we find out that a vast majority of traces comes from only two locations - Deir el-Medina and Tell el-Amarna – both with very particular characteristics. This may leads us to believe that they are the only places where it's possible to make a reconstitution of this practice.

As a final point, the issue that raises the greatest difficulties: the complexity of interpretation of sources and identification of its origin context. The truth is that the meaning and usefulness of the sources that survived is not always entirely clear, and inaccurate excavation records aggravate this situation. To study the Household Religion we resort to material found inside the houses in different settlements, but this does not ensures that that was the final place of use of such piece. So, not knowing for sure the purpose and context of a particular piece, we are in danger of assigning it a function that wasn't really its⁵. We may relate the piece with the Household Religion when indeed it belonged to another type of practice, or even

³ According to Ritner the predominance of the sources related to the Official Cult justifies the preference to his study over the Household Religion. Cf. Ritner, R., *Op. Cit.*, 172.

⁴ Cf. Stevens, A., "Domestic Religious Practices" in Dielman J.; Wendrich, W. (eds.), *UCLA – Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1.

⁵ Cf. Ritner R., *Op. Cit.*, 172.

assign it a religious function when in fact it could be merely a toy or even a decorative object⁶. C. Renfrew and P. Bahn tell us about this difficulty with regard to identifications of the functionality of the sources: “*One problem that archaeologists face is that these belief systems are not always given expression in material culture. And when they are (...) there is the problem that such actions are not always clearly separated from the other actions of everyday life: cult can be embedded within everyday functional activity, and thus difficult to distinguish from it archaeologically.*”⁷ In particular on the Household Religion: “*The problem of recognizing domestic cult practice from archaeological evidence may often be considerable, since those very qualities of separateness and specialization which characterize communal cult may be lacking.*”⁸

Therefore, these issues hamper the contribution of archaeological sources for the study of Household Religion in Ancient Egypt. However they are not really prohibitive since it's possible to overcome them in order to maximize his contribution. If there are aspects that will always have an aura of uncertainty, there are others whose detailed analyses will allow us to reach more concrete ideas.

Now we will look to these material sources, beginning by identify their places of provenance and then the categories where they belong.

At the date of publication of this paper there are identified twenty-three settlements⁹ – dating from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period – where in a greater or lesser number have been identified archaeological remains associated with the Household Religion.

⁶ Cf. Stevens, A., *Op. Cit.*, 3.

⁷ Renfrew, C., Bahn, P., *Archaeology. Theories, methods and practice*, 388.

⁸ Renfrew C., “Towards a framework for the archaeology of cult practice” in Renfrew C., *The archaeology of Cult: The Sanctuary at Phylakopi*, 22.

⁹ This article is published in the course of the investigation for a PhD thesis devoted to the Household Religion in Ancient Egypt so, it's possible that in the during of the work will be identified new places to add to this list.

Table I – Places where have been identified traces associated with Household Religion.¹⁰

<i>Settlement</i>	<i>Period</i>
Abydos	Early Dynastic Period Old Kingdom First Intermediate Period
Elephantine (*)	Old Kingdom
Mirgissa (*)	Middle Kingdom
Uronarti (*)	Middle Kingdom
Shalfak (*)	Middle Kingdom
Lahun	Middle Kingdom
Qasr el-Sagha	Middle Kingdom
Buhen	Middle Kingdom New Kingdom
Lisht	Middle Kingdom Second Intermediate Period New Kingdom Third Intermediate Period
Tell el-Dabaa	Middle Kingdom Second Intermediate Period
Askut	Middle Kingdom New Kingdom
Abydos Sul (<i>Wah- Sut</i>)	Middle Kingdom New Kingdom
Deir el-Ballas	Second Intermediate Period
Sesebi	New Kingdom
Tell el-Amarna	New Kingdom
Amara West	New Kingdom

¹⁰ Most of these settlements were identified by A. Stevens. Cf. Stevens, A., *Op. Cit.*, 12 – 20. The ones marked with (*) were identified by the author during his research.

Deir el-Medina	New Kingdom
Medinet Habu	New Kingdom
Kom Medinet Ghurab	Third Intermediate Period
Kom Rabia (Memphis)	New Kingdom
El-Ashmunein	Third Intermediate Period
Karnak	Third Intermediate Period
Tell el-Muqdam	Late Period
	Late Period

Only thirteen of these sites have vestiges of periods prior to the New Kingdom and, only two of these provide sources which date from the Old Kingdom, therefore it will be really hard to build a clear idea of religious practices in home during this period. However with regard to the Middle Kingdom we can consider that we have a significant amount of information that is perhaps sufficient to achieve this objective more easily.

Generally speaking, the sources identified in these sites can be grouped into three different categories: cult installations, objects and decorations.

The cult installations, such as altars, shrines and niches, allow us to build an idea about the space that cult occupied at home. There are examples of these traces since the Middle Kingdom.

The objects present the most varied types and possible purposes. This group includes, for example, amulets, jewellery, stelae, busts, statues, different types of figurines in pottery and clay, ostraca, portable cult equipment, implements and infant burials. Objects can help us to identify, among other things, types of ritual, how they occurred, and entities or deities worshipped. Traces in this group can be identified right from the Old Kingdom.

Finally, the decorations, painted or engraved on the walls or lintels, illustrate scenes of devotion or laudatory texts dedicated to a particular deity or deities. Here again we have examples only from the Middle Kingdom.

We now turn to a more specific and detailed analysis in order to understand slightly better the contribution of these sources and also the difficulties associated with the interpretation of material remains in this context. To do so we will analyze two particular cases that allow, at the same time, identify the problems we deal with and the type of contribution of these sources – that is, what they say about this religious practice. First of all, we will look at a trace that we classify of architectural nature, commonly known as Box Bed or Lit Clos; then another type of source that belongs to the category of objects – the clay figurines.

The Deir el-Medina Box Beds

In Deir el-Medina we found a vestige usually seen as connected to the Household Religion and which raises more questions. Although the religious connections seem clear, the real function of this architectural structure is not obvious and raises several questions among the scholars. We are talking about the so-called Box Bed or Lit Clos¹¹.

Deir el-Medina is a settlement, of about 68 houses, situated in the West Bank of Thebes where lived the community of workmen, and their families, employed in the construction of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The village was founded in the eighteenth Dynasty under the Phar-

¹¹ Bruyère chose to call this structure *lit clos*: “L’aspect de ces lits à baldaquin évoqua pour nous le souvenir des lit clos Bretons et nous porta naturellement à les baptiser ainsi avant de chercher à découvrir leur véritable sens archéologique.” Bruyère, B., *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el-Médineh (1934 - 1935)*, 57. L. Meskell, for example, uses the same expression, although she states that it refers to a specific reality, a not-Egyptian one. Meskell, L., *Vies privées des Égyptiens. Nouvel Empire. 1539-1075*, 135. In the bibliography we can also find other designations like Box Bed, Elevated Bed, Bedlike constructions and Enclosed Beds.

aoh Tuthmosis I and was expanded during the nineteenth and twentieth Dynasties¹².

In the front room of 28¹³ Deir el-Medina houses, Bruyère¹⁴ identified a mud brick structure that really caught his attention: “[...] *ce qui frappe les plus en pénétrant dans la première salle, c’est la vue d’une construction de brique dressée dans un des angles et qui, par son importance, accuse tout de suite la part primordiale prise par elle dans l’affectation de la pièce.*”¹⁵

The dating of these structures is still unresolved. Bruyère states that the houses of the early XVIII dynasty did not have this type of structures and that they only begun to be built after the reign of Thutmose III¹⁶. However, others authors, like Kemp, believes that the Box Beds were built after the Amarna period¹⁷.

More specifically we are talking about a construction of rectangular shape, which was located near one of the sidewalls of the front room of the house, measuring approximately 1,70 meters in length, 0,75 meters in height and 0,80 meters in width¹⁸. The walls could be partial or reach the ceiling¹⁹. And they were accessible via a stairway with three to five steps²⁰.

These structures could be identified in seven different shapes.

¹² Cf. Baines, J., Malek, J., *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 100.

¹³ Bruyère, B., 61. The author states that he found this structure in 28 of the 68 houses that he identified in this settlement. In other words there are box beds in about 41% of Deir el-Medina houses.

¹⁴ Bernard Bruyère and the French Institute excavated in Deir el-Medina in the 1930s.

¹⁵ Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 55.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 61.

¹⁷ Cf. Kemp, B., “Wall paintings from the Workmen’s Village at el-’Amarna’ in *JE.A 65* (1979) : 51.

¹⁸ Cf. Bruyère B., *Op. Cit.*, 56.

¹⁹ Cf. Ritner R., *Op. Cit.*, 179.

²⁰ Cf. Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 56.

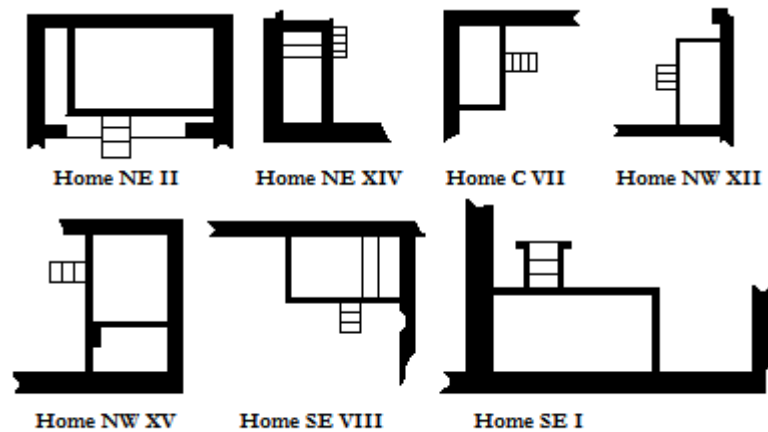


Figure I – The seven forms of the Box Beds presented by B. Bruyère²¹.
Drawing by the author.

The decoration of the Box Beds is also quite diverse. The simplest would be just whitewashed; others could have gray panels with a black border and framed by large white bands. These panels may or may not have drawings. Those who had were usually painted with thick white lines. Unfortunately most of the images are greatly damaged and incomplete, which hinders its acquaintance and analysis. Still, it was possible to identify some of the images present in the Box Bed decoration.

One of the most present images is the god Bes, who appears dancing, playing musical instruments, as drums and double flute, or can also be represented immobilized and winged. In some cases only debris were found that allow identify the face of this deity. Specifically were located at least six houses where the Box Bed presents Bes related decoration: NE X²², NE XII²³, NE XIII²⁴, SE IX²⁵, C V²⁶ e SW VI²⁷.

²¹ Cf. *Ibidem*, 56.

²² Cf. *Ibidem*, 225.

²³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 257.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 259.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 276.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 305.

²⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 330.

The god Bes was a popular domestic genius, harmless, beneficial. Bes, as Tauret, was linked to the protection of pregnant women and children, was a deity of birth and responsible for the transmission of virile strength to the newborn, therefore was a symbol of family protection. In addition he was also a patron of music, dance, fun and pleasure. And when he was represented playing and dancing was also evoked his protective ability to ward off by the noise and ugliness any evil spirit who come close. His role extended to protection during sleep since he removes the evil spirits of dreams. Finally he was also linked to female beauty, personal hygiene, elegance and adornments²⁸.

In four other houses different kinds of decorative motifs were identified.

In the House NW XII²⁹ remains the bottom of a polychromatic panel located on a small sidewall of the Box Bed where is represented a human figure standing on a papyrus skiff in the Nile swamps. Bruyère believes this is a man; while Meskell refers that would be probably a woman³⁰. The meaning of such decoration is unclear.

In the House C VII³¹ was identified on the left side of the front of the Box Bed a drawing in white lines on a gray panel, which represents a woman doing her personal hygiene accompanied by a servant kneeling before her.

In the house SE VIII³² the Box Bed entrance was surrounded by polychromatic panels, remaining only the bottom of a drawing that represents a dancer playing double flute surrounded by leaves of convolvulus. The dancer has a tattoo on each thigh, an image that Bruyères identifies as the god Bes.

²⁸ Cf. Sales, J. C., *As Divindades Egípcias*, 318 - 321.

²⁹ Cf. Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 59 and 286. Plate IX.

³⁰ Cf. Meskell, L., "Re-em(bed)ing sex: domesticity, sexuality, and ritual in New Kingdom Egypt" in Schmidt, R. A., Voss, B. L. (ed.) *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, 259.

³¹ Cf. Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 59 and 311. Plate IX.

³² Cf. *Ibidem*, 60 and 275. Plate X - 3.

Finally, in the Home SE I³³ we find the Box Bed that Bruyère describe as “(...) *le plus somptueusement construit et décoré de tous*.”³⁴ Two polychromatic panels surrounded the entrance but what remains is only the bottom of the left panel. In this is identifiable an image that represents four women, one sitting, wrapped in convolvulus leaves. Two columns with papyrus shape flank the scene. Bruyère made a detailed analysis of this image³⁵ based on comparison with the ostraca BM EA 8506 that represents a seated woman breast-feeding also flanked by convolvulus. The author concludes that it is a representation of a mother-goddess breast-feeding surrounded by three servants³⁶. This theory is not confirmed, yet everything seems to indicate that this is indeed a breast-feeding scene or in a broader perspective a birth scene.

In general we can say that the decorations identified in the Box Beds are specifically related to women's lives³⁷, and even the frequent presence of the god Bes, due to the characteristics listed above, fit into this logic. Meskell even considers that the first division is notoriously female oriented³⁸ and adds that these decorations also have an erotic nature and consequently the idea of sexuality was also very present. The Egyptians regarded the convolvulus leaves, for example, as an erotic symbol³⁹.

Finally, under this characterization of the Box Beds seems important to include also other structures and objects that were found in its vicinity because they could serve as an aid to this study⁴⁰.

In only two of the Box Beds identified by Bruyère were located objects within: in house C VII existed a fragment of a wooden headrest and also a

³³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 59, 60 and 264. Plate X.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 59.

³⁵ Cf. Bruyère, B., “Un fragment de fresque de Deir el-Médineh” in *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*, 22, 121 - 133. On page 132 the author presents a reconstitution of the image and at the last page of the article there is a reproduction of the original.

³⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 127.

³⁷ Cf. Friedman, F., “Aspects of domestic life and religion” in Lesko, L. (ed.) *Pharaoh's workers: The villagers of Deir el Medina*, 98.

³⁸ Cf. Meskell, L., *Op. Cit.*, 134.

³⁹ Cf. Meskell, L., *Op. Cit.*, 2000, 159.

⁴⁰ Note that will only be considered the objects and structures identified in association with a Box Bed.

wooden comb⁴¹; in the house NE XI there was found a limestone head-rest, a part of a possible divinity statue and a fragment of a female statue in limestone⁴².

The most common, although not very frequent, is the identification of objects in the vicinity of the Box Bed such as offering tables⁴³, stelae⁴⁴, busts⁴⁵, animals and human figurines, and ex-votos (Hathor)⁴⁶.

We can also refer to the existence of other architectural structures as niches for stelae or busts⁴⁷, cavities for offering tables⁴⁸ and even cultic cupboards⁴⁹ that according to Bruyère serve to keep the material used in familiar religious ceremonies⁵⁰.

After this presentation of the Box Bed it is time to try to understand its use.

There are several proposals in the present bibliography on the Box Bed possible purposes: a sleeping bed, a birth bed, a female space, a place to sit, an altar or even a multifunctional structure. Three of these proposals are most commonly accepted: those linking this area to the female world, fertility and childbirth, and the one that sees it as an altar for use in domestic rituals.

For the scholars seems impossible to ignore the iconographic motifs present in the Bod Beds decoration and, therefore, it is accepted that these

⁴¹ Cf. Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 312.

⁴² Cf. *Ibidem*, 256.

⁴³ Home SE IX. Cf *Ibidem*, pp. 77 and 276. Home NE XI. Cf *Ibidem*, 256.

⁴⁴ Home C VI. Cf *Ibidem*, p. 309. Home SW VI. Cf *Ibidem*, 334 and 335.

⁴⁵ Home VI. Cf *Ibidem*, 309.

⁴⁶ Home SW VI. Cf *Ibidem*, 276 and 277.

⁴⁷ Home C V. Cf *Ibidem*, p. 305. Home C VI. Cf *Ibidem*, 60 and 308. Home SE VII. Cf *Ibidem*, 272. Home SE VIII. Cf *Ibidem*, 60 and 275.

⁴⁸ Home SE VIII. Cf *Ibidem*, 60 and 275.

⁴⁹ Home NE XV. Cf *Ibidem*, 262. Home SW VI. Cf *Ibidem*, 330.

⁵⁰ Cf *Ibidem*, 330.

would be a space related to woman, fertility, and childbirth and even with sexuality⁵¹.

However, assuming this evidence, dissents are identified: some scholars look to these structures and recognized them an obvious religious character; by contrast, others, like Lesko, don't believe that the Box Beds had a purely religious purpose⁵², on the contrary, considers that the arguments that points to that are not always convincing and indicates the stairs as a deterrent argument of this theory because she believes that they will no be necessary to access an altar⁵³. This Author states: *It makes more sense to me that these structures would have provided a safer environment for the newborn in which possible the mother could spend her 14 days of purification with her child.*⁵⁴

For the defenders of the Box Bed as a structure with religious purposes, (a possible domestic altar), there is a point of comparison that seems to bring a greater security: Tell El-Amarna⁵⁵.

In Tell el-Amarna were identified structures in some gardens and in the central rooms of some houses that, although somewhat different, have construction characteristics close to the Deir el-Medina Box Beds⁵⁶, being that in Amarna the functionality of these structures was more easily established due to the presence of objects of religious and cultic nature, more explicit decorations⁵⁷ and associated structures such as pedestals for the placement of busts or stelae.

⁵¹ Cf. Valbelle, D., "Les ouvriers de la tombe": Deir el-Médineh à l'époque Ramesside, 261; Ritner, R., *Op. Cit.*, 179; Meskell, L., *Op. Cit.*, 2002, 134/5.

⁵² Cf. Lesko, B., "Household and domestic religion in Ancient Egypt" in Bodel, J., Olyan, S. (ed.), *Household religion in antiquity. The Ancient World: comparative histories*, 206.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 205. Note that Bruyère and Ritner use the architectural typology of these structures to make a parallel with the temples and chapels. Cf. Bruyère, B., *Op. Cit.*, 62; Cf. Ritner, R., *Op. Cit.*, 180.

⁵⁴ Lesko, B., *Op. Cit.*, 205.

⁵⁵ According to Renfrew "(...) the inference of cult significance may plausibly be carried from one context to another in favourable circumstances. If a particular symbol has been identified as of cult significance, through an analysis of a context in one assemblage, its occurrence in another may well carry some presumption of a ritual context there also." Renfrew, C., *Op. Cit.*, 15.

⁵⁶ About Tell el-Amarna altars see: Ikram, S., "Domestic shrines and the cult of the royal family at el-Amarna" in *JEA* 75 (1989): 89 – 101; Stevens, A., "The material evidence for domestic religion at Amarna and preliminary remarks on its interpretation" in *JEA* 89 (2003): 143 – 168; Stevens, A., *Private religion at Amarna: The material evidence*.

⁵⁷ Presence of imagetic associated with the cult of the royal family.

Thus, although somewhat different⁵⁸, this raises the possibility that if the interpretation of the Amarna structures is correct by comparison the Deir el-Medina ones may have had a similar utility⁵⁹, i.e., in both case they were domestic altars.

Therefore, on the Box Bed we can conclude that this is an architectural vestige whose purpose is not entirely clear but raises various clues and allows getting some information about the Household Religion in Ancient Egypt. The iconography, the objects and associated structures and the comparison with Amarna allows pointing the possibility that we are facing a construction of religious nature particularly geared to the concerns related to women's lives mostly in their mother's condition.

The hypothesis that we are dealing effectively with a house altar is not entirely strange to the reality of this civilizations and do not only applies to the period in question. Although generally these structures are simple, the fact is that some constructions have been identified, with certainty, as altars in other Ancient Egypt settlements. In Mirgissa (Middle Kingdom) was identified a mud brick pedestal placed against a wall surmounted by a niche⁶⁰; in Lisht (Middle Kingdom; First Intermediate Period) there are two examples of mud brick structures, simple platforms, one leaning against a wall and other at the center of a room, this one had upon it a fragment of a stela with inscriptions⁶¹; at Tell el-Dab'a (Middle Kingdom) was located a simple, rectangular mud brick pedestal next to a wall⁶²; at Askut (Middle and New Kingdom) there is a niche dating from Middle Kingdom associated to a later altar upon which was found a funerary stele and also in other house was found an altar dating from the Second Inter-

⁵⁸ For instance in Tell el-Amarna no birth or female-related imagery was identified. Cf. Friedman, F., *Op. Cit.*, 111.

⁵⁹ Cf. Stevens, A., *Op. Cit.*, 2003, 149; Friedman, F., *Op. Cit.*, 111.

⁶⁰ Cf. Dunham, D., *Second cataract Forts: Uronarti, Shalfak, Mirgissa*, 149.

⁶¹ Cf. Arnold, F., "Settlement remains at Lisht-North" in Bietak, M. (ed.), *Haus und Palast im alten Ägypten*, 17; Mace, A., "The Egyptian Expedition 1920 - 1921 I: Excavations at Lisht" in *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 16, 12, Fig.2.

⁶² Bietak, M., *Tell el-Dab'a V: Ein Friedhofsbezirk der mittleren Bronzezeitkultur mit Totentempel und Siedlungsschichten*, 32.

mediate Period with more elaborate characteristics⁶³; finally were recognized in Medinet Habu houses (New Kingdom; Third Intermediate Period) structures very similar to those of Deir el-Medina identified by Hölscher as small mud-brick altar, and these were also accessible by stairs⁶⁴.

Thus, the assumption that the Box Beds were altars would not collide with the studied reality, but as we cannot have certainties, we limit ourselves to consider and analyze this possibility and to try to rebuild the domestic ritual space based on that. However these structures can tell us more than that on the Household Religion. The truth is that, for example, the presence of the god Bes helps us to include this divinity in the list of deities associated to this practice, and the presence of iconography related to woman, fertility, childbirth and newborns refers to the possible concerns underlying the ritual practices at home. All this without including all other traces identified in Deir el-Medina houses.

The Clay Figurines

The second case that will be analyzed is of a quite smaller dimension but only regarding the size, not the contribution or even the issues involved. We move from architectural structures to objects but the interpretation difficulties remains.

These objects are made of clay, often simple, with small sizes, frequently handmade and poorly executed. They may represent anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and objects. These figurines can be documented for all periods of Egyptian history and were found in different contexts such as houses, chapels and tombs.

⁶³ Cf. Smith, S. T., *Wretched Kush: Ethnic identities and boundaries in Egypt's Nubian empire*, 129.

⁶⁴ Cf. Hölscher, U., *The excavation of Medinet Habu II: The temples of the Eighteenth Dynasty*, 69, Fig. 54; Hölscher, U., *The excavation of Medinet Habu V: Post Ramessid remains*, 7, Fig. 6 and Plate 6 – I.

In this study we will look to those found in domestic spaces, the others found elsewhere will serve here only as interpretative aids. And we will pay a special attention to only two types: the animal and feminine⁶⁵ figurines.

We may say that the best departure point for this study is Lahun, a Middle Kingdom settlement where Petrie found a great number of objects that he identified as toys: (...) *amusement were also well known. Of children toys there was an abundance.*⁶⁶ And also states: *Clay toys were made of many forms.*⁶⁷

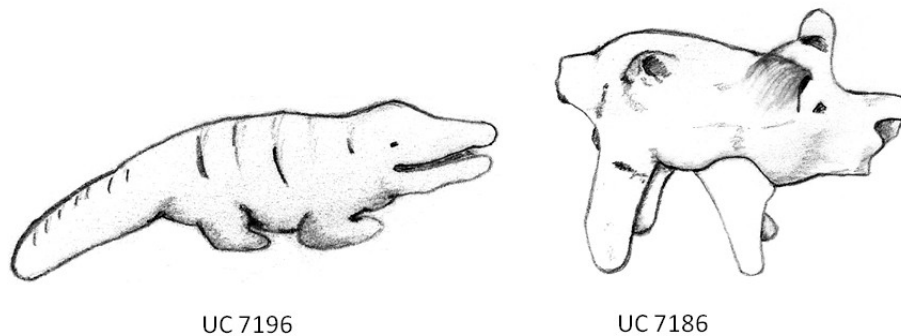


Figure II – Two examples of animal clay figurines found by Petrie at Lahun.

Drawing by the author.

At Lahun were found several figurines, both animal and human, and even others hard to classify⁶⁸.

The animal figurines could represent sheep, turtles, pigs, lizards, birds, crocodiles and hippopotamus; the sizes are on average 5,1 centimeters in length and may be painted in red, black or grey.

⁶⁵ The feminine figures are the majority in the human type group.

⁶⁶ Petrie, W. M. F., *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara*, 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ Quirke has made a survey on the Lahun figures. See Quirke, S., "Figures of clay: Toys or ritual objects?" in Quirke, S. (ed.), *Lahun Studies*.

These objects have been identified in other settlements, besides Lahun, in the abovementioned set such as: Mirgissa, Uronarti, Buhen⁶⁹, Shalfak, Askut, Deir el-Ballas, Amarna, Amara West, Medinet Habu, Kom Rabia and El-Ashmunein⁷⁰. Although, maybe excluding Medinet Habu, the number of items identified in these places is much lower than those present at Lahun. In some places were found only one or two examples. The figurines found in this places increase the races of animals identified: dogs, cows or bulls, horses, cockerels, baboons, camels, gazelles, lions and fishes.

According to Teeter the animals figurines are *among the most common themes for terra-cotta figurines* and *among the most difficult to date and interpret*.⁷¹

With regard to the interpretation, the question that concerns us the most, the function of animal figurines is often not clear and there are two major theories: one that defend that they were toys used for children amusement, the other believes that these small objects were used as votive items.

Petrie identified the ones he found at Lahun as toys, as referred, but today this is not a totally accepted classification. Excluding David who states that the figurines found at Lahun were really toys and probably made by the children themselves⁷², the scholars tend to believe that these figurines had religious purposes and indicate the possible association between the represented animals and some deities⁷³, for example, the crocodile was the icon of the god Sobek and the Hippopotamus is associated with the goddess of fertility Taueret⁷⁴. In this case they would be used as votive offerings, but some scholars also points to the possibility that these animals' figurines were also used as a part of some magical rituals⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ For Uronarti and Buhen see *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ See map I.

⁷¹ Teeter, E., *Baked Clay Figurines and Votive Beds from Medinet Habu*, 110.

⁷² Cf. David, R.A., *The Pyramid builders of ancient Egypt. A Modern Investigation of Pharaohs Workforce*, 162 – 163.

⁷³ Cf. Quirke, S., *Op. Cit.*, 149.

⁷⁴ Szpakowska, K., *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt: Recreating Lahun*, 57 - 58.

⁷⁵ Cf. Szpakowska, K., *Op. Cit.*, 131.

Nevertheless, we can not be sure of the real functions of these objects, even though it seems more likely that they were indeed ritual items since besides being found at home they were also found at obvious religious contexts such as tombs⁷⁶. And even in some settlements as Uronarti and Buhen, due to their military nature, despite the fact that we can not deny the presence of woman and children, but it makes more sense to believe that these objects were used by men with protective purposes⁷⁷.

The female figurines were also found in great number at Lahun, but in this case the interpretation seems more delimited⁷⁸.

First of all we may say that these figurines were present in several settlements where were identified sources related to Household Religion such as Buhen, Uronarti, Amara West, Deir el-Medina, Askut, El-Ashmunein, Amarna, Deir el-Ballas, Abydos and in great number at Medinet Habu⁷⁹.

Just as the animal figurines, the feminine ones were first identified as toys. And have also been seen as figurines with an erotic nature and even designated as ‘*concubines for the dead*’⁷⁹, i.e., they would be *sexual plaything for the dead*⁸⁰. However, these perspectives are currently set aside due to several issues that undermine their veracity. The possibility of being toys is questioned for the reason that they were present in adult burials, of men and women, in temples⁸¹ and because many of these figurines had an emphasis placed on breasts and in the pubic area⁸², which would not be expected in the case of children articles; the hypothesis of being erotic and sexual figurines is questioned due to the presence of these objects in women and chil-

⁷⁶ At Lisht, for example.

⁷⁷ Cf. Quirke, S., *Op. Cit.*, 149.

⁷⁸ Should be noted that the clay female figures are a part of a wide range where are identified various forms and materials (faience, ivory, stone, wood). Cf. Waraksa, E. A., “Female figurines (Pharaonic Period)” in Wendrich, W. (ed.), *UCLA, Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1.

⁷⁹ Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 3; Waraksa, E. A., *Female Figurines from the Mut Precint: Context and Ritual Function*, 13; Pinch, G., “Offerings to Hathor” in *Folklore*, Vol.93, No. 2, 146.

⁸⁰ Pinch, G., *Op. Cit.*, 146.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibidem*; Teeter, E., *Op. Cit.*, 3.

⁸² Cf. Pinch, G., *Op. Cit.*, 146.

dren graves, in domestic contexts and in temples, in addition they did not present potentially erotic poses⁸³.

The current prevailing theory, accepted by general consensus⁸⁴, is that these female figurines were fertility figurines, a thesis sustained by their iconography, their presence in temples devoted to Hathor⁸⁵ and in domestic shrines⁸⁶. They should be offered as a way of thanking for a divine intercession or to obtain a divine support.

The notion of fertility is regarded in a broad sense. These figurines were used at home, in temples and in funerary context thus the fertility may be seen as fertility itself, as rebirth, health or protection, depending on the context⁸⁷. We can not even say that they were an exclusively female object because they have been found in men tombs and in settlements with a manifestly masculine nature, like the Nubian forts⁸⁸.

Although this thesis is commonly accepted, Waraksa proposes a wider perspective based on the analysis of textual sources. She defends that these figurines were not used exclusively in fertility rituals but in a broader range of magico-medical rites and she justifies this based on magical spells that request the use of such figurines. So, it is suggested that this female figurines are generically designated as ritual objects⁸⁹.

As final note, must be referred, that these figurines are normally related to deities such as Hahor, Mut, Isis, Tauret, Nut and Selkek, for example. However, they may also have a generic nature, i.e., they could be associated to any goddess depending on the situation⁹⁰.

⁸³ Cf. Pinch, G., *Op. Cit.*, 146; Teeter, E., *Op. Cit.*, 3; Waraksa, E.A., *Op. Cit.*, 14.

⁸⁴ Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 3. This thesis was suggested by Pinch: "The term 'fertility figurine' seems the best description for these objects". Pinch, G., *Op. Cit.*, 147.

⁸⁵ With special relevance to Deir el-Bahari.

⁸⁶ Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 2009, 3.

⁸⁷ Cf. Teeter, E., *Op. Cit.*, 26 and 196.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, 3.

⁸⁹ Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 2009, 3; Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 2008.

⁹⁰ Cf. Waraksa, E. A., *Op. Cit.*, 2009, 3.

Although, it's still not totally clear the function of these figurines, especially regarding the zoomorphic ones, according to Teeter: *it is generally accepted that many of the clay figurines are votives that document the cult practices of people who could not afford a stone statue (...)*⁹¹. Thus, we have a type of source that allow us to know more about the religious practices of the non-elite believers and, in this case, their contribution goes beyond the Household Religion due to its presence in other contexts, like chapels and tombs.

The presence of this material in domestic contexts points to the possibility of votive practices and offerings within the Household Religion in Ancient Egypt. So, assuming that they had a religious purpose, we can know more about the concerns and motivations, for example the desire to ensure the birth of children, the deities involved and some practices that took place.

However, we can not completely exclude the possibility that some of these figurines have actually served to children amusement or could at least had a multiple use.

Another aspect that should be considered is the fact that the house may not always be the final place of use but only a crossing point, i.e., the piece has been found there even though it is intended to be deposited elsewhere.

Thus, taking in account the existence of similar forms (animal and human) in other materials, such for example pottery, and the diversity of places where they have been found, and following Quirke though⁹², it seems relevant to wonder whether we are dealing with a homogeneous set of material or if different materials, different locations and different types of use, may correspond to different purposes. Thereby is demonstrated the need for a survey and categorization in order to get more accurate answers,

⁹¹ Teeter, E., *Op. Cit.*, 5.

⁹² Cf. Quirke, S., *Op. Cit.*, 149; Cf. Szpakowska, K., *Op. Cit.*, 58.

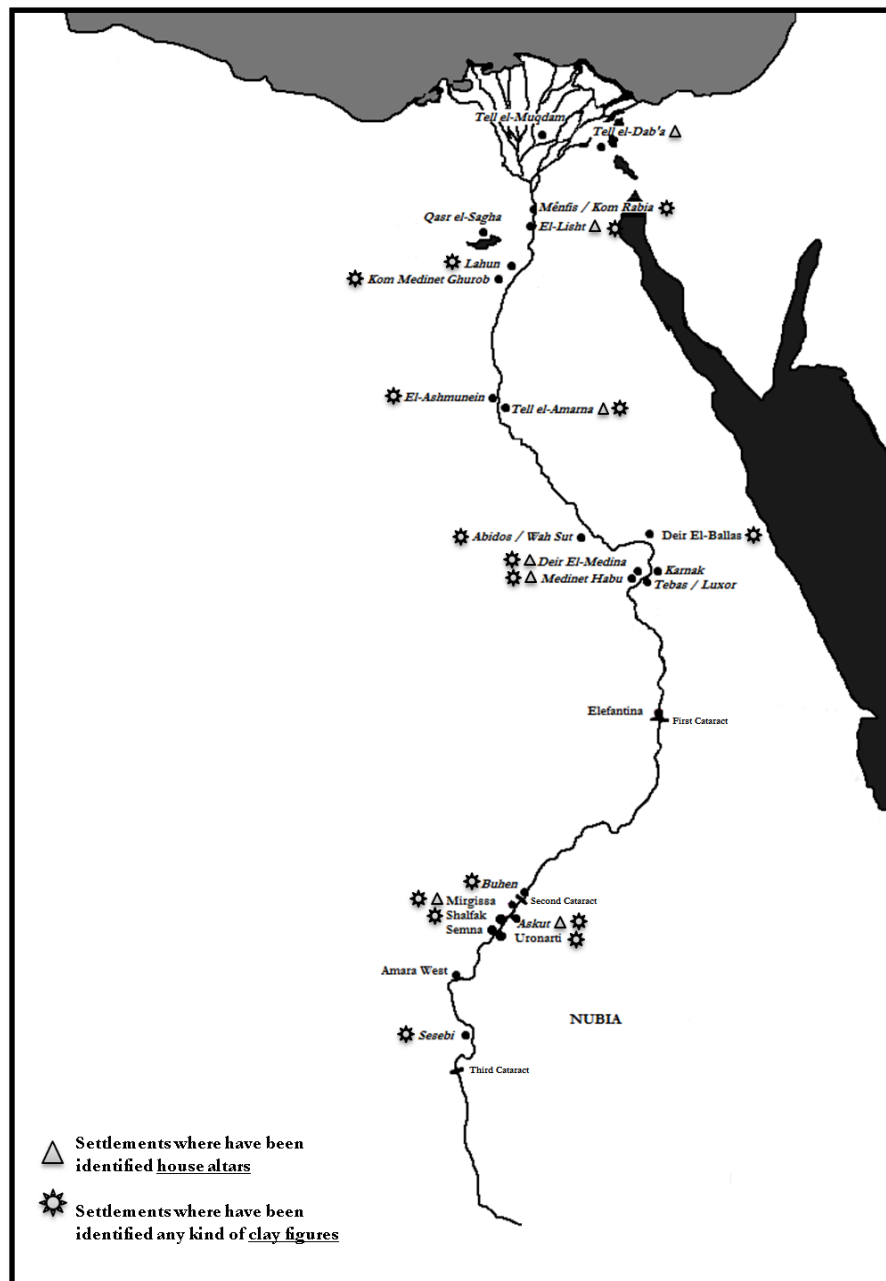
especially with regard to animal figurines since in the case of the women figurines the process is far more advanced.⁹³

Final Notes

These two examples, the Box Beds and the clay figurines, chosen due to their relevance and complexity, clearly demonstrate the problems and constraints we deal when working with material sources in the framework of Household Religion in ancient Egypt. However, we also realize that there is much we can learn about religious practices at home, about the deities involved in it, the underlying concerns and even the domestic ritual space, i.e., there's a lot that the material sources can tell us about the Household Religion in ancient Egypt, so, we must overcome the difficulties in order to take advantage of them and build a more complete picture of this religious practice.

⁹³ On this subject see: Pinch, G., *Votive offerings to Hathor* and Waraksa, E. A., *Female Figurines from the Mut Precinct: Context and Ritual Function*.

Map I – Identification of settlements with house altars and clay figurines⁹⁴.



⁹⁴ Were only considered the settlements aforementioned as having Household Religion related sources.

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